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Searching for Lt. David Hunter: Proctor MIA



NANCY KENNEDY

First Lieutenant David Stansfield Hunter (above) was shot down over Buna Bay, New Guinea and reported as missing in action in July 1942. Note the class ring on David's ring finger. See enlargement of the ring on the back cover.

About the Author

Matthew Kennedy lives in Harrison, New York. While not a native Vermonter, his family has roots in the state dating back to the 18th century. Mr. Kennedy holds a B.A. and M.A. in History from Columbia University.

Introduction

Lieutenant David Hunter, a pilot in the U.S. Army Air Corps, was reported missing in action in July 1942 in the South Pacific. There was evidence that he might have been taken captive by the Japanese.

It was only after the end of World War II that the Department of War found some evidence that confirmed his capture and possible death at the hands of the Japanese.

In 1990 David's nephew, Matthew Kennedy, travelled to the New Guinea area to search for evidence of his uncle. Matthew kept a diary of his visit and took numerous photos of the area he visited.

Sometime after his visit Matthew was able to view Department of the Army records of the military search for evidence of David. Matthew was able to establish a case with the Department of the Army Past Conflict Repatriations Branch at Fort Knox KY. Other records are held by the National Archives and the Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency in Washington, DC and Hawaii which still conducts searches.

In 2013 Matthew put together the following story of his search using the military search records and his diary notes to produce a private record for his family. When the story was brought to the attention of the Rutland Historical Society, the Publications Committee felt it was deserving of a larger audience. Matthew has graciously given permission for the Society to share this story.

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Searching for Lt. David Hunter: Proctor MIA

By Matthew P. Kennedy

In 1990 I found myself between jobs and with no particular personal commitments. I had saved a little money and thought this could be a once in a lifetime opportunity to travel to some remote foreign destinations. One extremely remote place I wanted to visit was Rabaul in Papua New Guinea. I would need time to get there and now I had it.



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I had always been deeply interested in the story of my mother's brother who as a pilot in the Army Air Corps was reported missing in action in July 1942 in the South Pacific. According to a United States Department of War (now Department of the Army) letter to my grandparents, their son had been taken to a Japanese prisoner of war camp in Rabaul after being shot down and captured while on a mission over Buna Bay, New Guinea.

Rabaul and Buna area in New Guinea.

So I bought an around the world air ticket and resolved, among other things, to go to Rabaul.

While there was always a chance I might learn something about my uncle and his time there, the primary objective of my visit would be to find a Chinese man known to be the last person to have seen my uncle alive while he was held in the Japanese prison camp in Rabaul.

The story of my uncle, First Lieutenant David Stansfield Hunter, and his disappearance is well documented in family archives and my mother and her sister deserve credit for keeping the memory of their brother alive. As a boy I had heard the story of how my uncle was shot down while on a strafing mission over Buna Bay, captured by the Japanese

and sent to a prison camp in Rabaul, Japanese Imperial Army headquarters for the New Guinea-New Britain area. There he met a Chinese man whom the Japanese had impressed into labor as a cook for their soldiers. This Chinese man, named Seeto Kim How, also served food to Allied prisoners of war held at Rabaul and in this way came into contact with David Hunter. This is known because after the war the Department of War received David Hunter's high school class ring from Seeto Kim How and returned it to my grandfather.

Seeto Kim How had given the ring to a United States Marine Corps officer in November 1945 when the officer was sent ashore at Rabaul to conduct a survey of damage done to Japanese personnel, material and morale by the three year Allied bombing of the Japanese base there. The officer, who later wrote to my grandfather regarding his meeting with Seeto Kim How, turned the ring over to the Department of War. After metallurgical testing and other analysis the Department of War was able to determine the manufacturer of the ring and that it had been made for the graduating class of 1937 of the Proctor, Vermont High School. As the ring bore the initials "D.S.H.", it was further determined that the ring belonged to David Stansfield Hunter who was confirmed to be the only person in the high school's 1937 graduating class to have those initials.



David Hunter was born on October 29, 1918 in Proctor, Vermont. In the autumn of 1940 he left Middlebury College where he was a member of the Class of 1942 to enlist in the Army Air Corps. He received his primary training at Albany, Georgia and his secondary training at Gunther Field, Alabama. On graduating from his Air Corps training he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant at Maxwell Field, Alabama where he was a member of "Eager Squadron" B. David Hunter was promoted to First Lieutenant in February 1942 when he was sent to Australia.

Lieutenant Hunter was assigned to Eightieth Fighter Squadron, Eighth Fighter Group which was stationed in Port Moresby, New Guinea. On the morning of July 22, 1942 he was lost in an attack on the enemy as they were making their initial landing at Buna Bay. Lieutenant Hunter's airplane was evidently hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire as he was pulling up from a strafing run and he was forced to abandon it. According to a letter from his commanding officer at the time, some of the pilots in the flight saw Lieutenant Hunter's parachute open and estimated that he landed inside positions held by the enemy in the midst of intense enemy ground fire. According to the Department of War, witnesses stated that he was wounded while descending by parachute and careful investigation has failed to reveal any trace of him since that date.

As I set off on my trip, I had little idea of what to expect in New Guinea or of what I might learn about my uncle, if anything. In fact, as Seeto Kim How was reported to have been around 35-40 years old in 1945, I didn't even know if he would be alive nearly 50 years later. Also, in 1990 I had not read all of the family archives relating to David Hunter's disappearance as it was at least 10 years later before these records were compiled, organized and made more readily available. However, I did know Seeto Kim How's name and the story of how David Hunter had given him the class ring while in the Japanese prison camp. This much had been confirmed in a letter the Marine officer had sent to my grandfather after meeting Seeto Kim How in Rabaul. This is also confirmed in post-war correspondence between my grandfather and the Department of War. In fact, with the assistance of the Department of War my grandfather and Seeto Kim How had even established a brief correspondence after the war. I knew enough to get me started and at a minimum was determined to find Seeto Kim How or at least learn what had become of him.

Having planned the general outline of my trip, I left New York in early May 1990 and by May 29 was on an Air Niugini flight out of Cairns, Australia bound for Port Moresby. As I wrote in my travel diary while flying over the Coral Sea, I had no idea what to expect in New Guinea but was certain that this part of my journey would take me well off the beaten path.

Later that day, after catching a connecting flight out of Port Moresby, I arrived in Rabaul, East New Britain. New Britain is an island off the north coast of Papua New Guinea and Rabaul is set on a bay in the

northeast part of the island. With its spectacular harbor, Rabaul had a very dramatic physical setting on the edge of a flooded caldera of a large volcano. At that time Rabaul was a popular site for scuba diving and snorkeling and while there I was asked if I wanted to dive down and look at Japanese aircraft and naval vessels submerged under the sea. It was one of the regrets of my trip that I didn't take advantage of this opportunity. Although I had just done some shallow water diving at the Great Barrier Reef, I was not a certified diver and didn't feel comfortable diving 50 feet and more with equipment I was not sure I could trust.



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Rabaul is on the island of New Britain off the north coast of Papua New Guinea. It has a spectacular harbor on the northeast of the island.

Surrounded by dense, lush jungle, the town of Rabaul had a pleasant atmosphere with an orderly urban plan, broad avenues and several parks, legacies of its time as the capital of German New Guinea prior to the First World War. However, my understanding is that Rabaul was destroyed by a volcano in 1994 with most of the old town being reduced to practical insignificance.

At the Rabaul airport I asked a man if he could recommend a good place to stay and how much I should pay for a ride into town. He was Dutch, said he would give me a ride into town and recommended that I stay at a place called the Hamamas Hotel. (Hamamas means happy in Pidgin English.) On the way into town the Dutchman asked what brought me to Rabaul and if I wanted to buy some timber. While I told

him I was not interested in timber, I did let him know the general purpose of my visit.

Upon arriving at the Hamamas, I checked in and told the manager, a friendly Scot, that I wanted to learn about the Japanese occupation during World War II and in particular was looking to track down an old Chinese man who had assisted my uncle while he was a P.O.W. in Rabaul. The hotel manager immediately drove me to the R.S.L. (Returned & Services League, a support organization for Australian veterans) and introduced me to an Australian and a New Zealander, both of whom lived in Rabaul. While not much for words, the New Zealander proved to be helpful and I would later learn that he was sort of the dean of the local expatriate community. He introduced me to another man at the R.S.L. bar and asked the man how I might find this old Chinese man named Seeto Kim How. Being of part Chinese and part New Guinean descent, the man was familiar with the local Chinese community and recognized the name Seeto Kim How, saying we would have to talk with yet another person he knew that might be related to Kim How. Before departing, the New Zealander told me to meet him at the R.S.L. bar the next day for lunch so we could seek out this man who might be related Kim How. The Australian man then drove me back to the hotel where the hotel manager and his wife kindly invited me to join them for a nice Chinese dinner in the hotel restaurant. I was off to a good start.

After some sightseeing the next morning, I went to the R.S.L. for my lunch meeting after which the New Zealander and I went in search of the man supposedly related to Seeto Kim How. We failed to find him that afternoon but left a message at his house asking him to come to the R.S.L. in the evening. We then drove back into town down tunnel hill which was full of tunnels built by the Japanese during World War



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Entrance to Japanese tunnel on Rabaul.

II to hide from Allied bombing. The tunnels reputedly were also used by the Kempeitai (the military police arm of the Japanese Imperial Army) to interrogate prisoners. I returned to the R.S.L. around 6 P.M. and it was packed in anticipation of a rugby match against the British Lions who also happened to be in town at that time. While waiting for my rendezvous, I struck up a conversation with a heavy set Dutchman who was about 60 years old. When I explained the reason I was in Rabaul he told me that he also was a World War II veteran having left Holland with his family at age 15 to join an anti-aircraft unit of the German Army. Fighting for Hitler was the right cause, he told me, because the Germans were fighting against the Russians and Communism and for a new, united Europe. He had left Europe after his brother was killed in Berlin street-fighting during the last week of the war and after his mother died ten weeks after the war ended in a Dutch prison camp where she was sent as a traitor. In any event, the reputed relative of Seeto Kim How I was hoping to meet never showed up. However, the Dutchman asked me to meet him the next day for lunch saying he would introduce me to an elderly local man who could tell me about the war era in Rabaul.

The next morning I planned to do some more sightseeing before lunch but first went to leave a note at the store of the man I had hoped to meet the night before. Through good fortune he showed up at the store while I was there. As it turned out he was not a relative of Seeto Kim How and in fact didn't even know him. However, he was very helpful and said he would introduce me to another Chinese man in town who was a leader of the local Chinese community. He then took me to a sophisticated, computerized office complex from where this Chinese community leader ran a huge food wholesaling operation. In the end this Chinese community leader and businessman, who I learned was the local distributor for Nestle, proved to be my ticket to Seeto Kim How as I believe his cousin was married to Kim How's daughter.

The Chinese businessman told me that Seeto Kim How had left Rabaul about 25 years earlier having had a successful post-war business career. He was now living in Sydney where he had moved after being offered the opportunity to gain Australian citizenship. The man listened to the story about my uncle the captured flyer, Seeto Kim How and the class ring and then called his cousin to get Kim How's phone number in Sydney. He then called Seeto Kim How and spoke with him for a while in Chinese.

According to my diary entries, Kim How told the Chinese businessman that after the war he had become a leader of the local Chinese community. There was a large ethnic Chinese community in Rabaul, many having been brought there by the Germans as far back as the early twentieth century to work on land reclamation and the construction of Rabaul harbor when the Germans moved their colonial capital to Rabaul from a site about 25 miles inland. During the Japanese occupation Kim How said he was chosen to be a cook for the Japanese commander. He also prepared and served meals for prisoners of war who had been brought to the Japanese military headquarters in Rabaul. Kim How said that the pilots held in the prison were all pretty malarial and the Japanese only fed them a low nutrition diet of rice with some fish sauce. He said he sneaked the POW's some quinine and bread when possible but could do little more. As tokens of appreciation, many of the pilots gave him watches, rings or whatever possessions they had which the Japanese had not taken. This was how he had gotten David Hunter's class ring. Kim How said he did not know where prisoners were executed or buried as the Japanese didn't tell him. Seeto Kim How then told the Chinese businessman to give me his address and phone number and said I should call him when in Sydney.

I was very excited to have located Seeto Kim How and learn that he not only was still alive but that he was open to meeting with me. I had to return to Sydney anyway to reconnect with my around the world air ticket, having taken a side trip from Sydney to Papua New Guinea. While this was good news, it also meant that I would have to leave Rabaul to meet Seeto Kim How and wouldn't be able to follow up on any local leads he might give me. Nevertheless, meeting Seeto Kim How was my primary objective and to meet him I had to return to Sydney. Before leaving New Guinea, however, I resolved to make a second side trip, this one to Buna Bay. But first I needed to wrap up my affairs in Rabaul.

After leaving the office of the Chinese businessman, I did a little more sightseeing and then went to the R.S.L. to meet the Dutchman as agreed the night before. After lunch he took me to meet a man of mixed Chinese/Melanesian descent. The man had a large stomach, close cut white hair and mustache, and a huge dent in his forehead, reputedly the result of an encounter with the local Chinese mafia. He also wore glasses and a British imperial decoration apparently earned for saving many lives during the war. This fellow, who was joined by his son,

was quite a character and regaled us with stories of Rabaul and New Guinea during the time of the Japanese occupation.

His portrayal of Rabaul at that time was pretty grim. According to this Chinese/Melanesian man, after occupying Rabaul the Japanese committed numerous atrocities, massacring many people, including captured Australian soldiers. Many local Chinese were put in caves and blown up with explosives after which the Japanese would seal the cave entrances. Other locals were put in barrels alive and then dumped at sea. Others were killed by forced consumption of gallon after gallon of water. Prisoners of war were usually shot. Most of these atrocities were committed by the Kempeitai which wore red arm bands and were much feared. On the other hand, he said many of the regular Japanese soldiers were quite friendly and clearly didn't want to be in Rabaul. In any event, according to this man, the killing of civilians was largely stopped by the Japanese Navy after an inter-service quarrel with the Imperial Army which he held responsible for perpetrating most of the war crimes. The man continued that he himself was impressed into service as a transport slave by the Japanese and was sent to Buna which was the primary landing beach for the Japanese push on Port Moresby. One



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A view of Buna Beach in 1990.

had no choice but to serve the Japanese, he said, because if you resisted they would kill you, your family or both. There was much suffering and many of his fellow transport workers died in service. According to his recollections, Moresby was saved largely by Australian subterfuge as a short route over the mountains to Moresby (1 week march) was blocked and disguised by the Australians. As a result the Japanese inadvertently took a longer three week march during which many starved in the jungle even after eating their pack horses. This bought time for the Australians and Americans to organize a resistance and stop the Japa-

nese before they could reach Port Moresby. After this failure, the man said, the Japanese shifted their attention to Guadalcanal, leaving only a token presence to occupy Buna. When I asked him whether he knew of or had heard anything about downed American pilots taken to Rabaul, he said they were given over to the Kempeitai for interrogation to find out if they had any knowledge of American military plans. When the prison was full, the Japanese would take the POW's up to the tunnels on the hills overlooking Rabaul and execute them. Nobody really knew where the prisoners were killed or if they were buried or dumped at sea. He said that two Chinese slaves were probably the only locals that would have known but they are both now dead.

After this very informative chat, the Dutchman invited me to his home where his Philippine wife prepared a very nice dinner. Following dinner we went yet again to the R.S.L. The club was fairly run down and while originally designed for ANZAC veterans it had resorted to admitting a motley crew of expatriates and locals to replace the declining number of veterans who were members. On a typical night, the expatriates sat at one end of the bar while the locals and mixed race patrons sat at the other. That night there were only a few stragglers at the club listening to Louis Armstrong on a stereo system installed earlier that day. My Dutch friend and an Australian guy got into a confrontation over whether to continue playing jazz or switch to disco and I felt lucky to escape and get back to my hotel.

On Saturday June 2 I could catch a connecting flight to Popondetta which was on the north coast of New Guinea and the closest airport to Buna Bay. This meant I had one more day to spend in Rabaul. So I made my way out past the airport and walked through a copra/coconut plantation where I was told there were a few Japanese warplanes.



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Japanese warplanes at Rabaul.

Right in the middle of the plantation, which was planted after the war, were a Zero, a bomber and a couple of twin engine planes which looked like transports to my untrained eye. All were in reasonably good condition given their long exposure to the elements. At first I saw only one of the transports but a plantation worker guided me to the other planes then climbed a tree and brought down 6 coconuts. The water was refreshing and the meat was my lunch.

After hustling a ticket on the fully booked Saturday morning flight, I returned to the hotel to rest and pack my few belongings. That evening I went back to the R.S.L. to hear a few more stories and a last drink with the guys. The most interesting story that night was told by one of the men I had met at the airport upon first arriving in Rabaul. He told about plans to resolve a crisis in the neighboring island of Bougainville which was crippling the Papua New Guinea economy. Apparently the government was unwilling to send in the military to settle the crisis so plans were under consideration to hire about 50 mercenaries to "clean up" the island and get business going again. I never heard whether or not these plans ever came to fruition. Leaving the R.S.L., I joined a few of the expatriates who invited me to join them at a local nightclub and then returned to the hotel for a few hours sleep before heading to the airport for my 7 A.M. flight.

My stay in Rabaul was very pleasant and I was flattered by the local expatriate community which took me in with open arms. However I had accomplished the main objective of my visit and it was time to move on. Although my new Dutch friend offered to take me for a ride through the back country on Saturday when he planned to inspect construction sites he was managing, I passed as this would have meant staying in Rabaul until Tuesday which was when the next flight to Popondetta was scheduled.

My flight to Popondetta the next morning was delayed an hour before departure, made stops in Hoskins and Lea then entailed a change of planes in Port Moresby. It was a hot, grueling day of Third World travel although the grind was somewhat alleviated by lively conversation with an Australian surveyor who had lived in Papua New Guinea for ten years. I reached my destination later that afternoon.

Very different than Rabaul which was a relatively prosperous commercial center with a spectacular harbor set amidst lush jungle, Popondetta was hot, dusty, busier and had a more desperate feeling with many young men lounging around with little apparent to do. I never

really felt comfortable there and Popondetta was the only place I visited on my entire trip where I felt for my physical safety.

I got a ride on a truck from the airport to a hotel recommended by an Englishman I had met in Rabaul who lived in Popondetta and managed a palm oil plant there. The hotel was full but referred me to the Oro Guest House which was a small, pleasant establishment run by a young Canadian. However, before going to the Oro Guest House, I went to look for a car which I needed the next day to visit the World War II sites at Kokoda and Buna. The car leasing operation recommended to me was not open but I managed to find another place that would lease me a vehicle. It was run by an Australian guy about my age who had grown up in Popondetta. I was shown into his office, sat down at his desk in the back room and he openly laughed at how he would rip me off if I really wanted to rent a vehicle from him. However, in his own way the Australian was very welcoming and after asking if I was a tax authority with a tape recorder, he proceeded to tell me how daily business was conducted in Popondetta and Papua New Guinea, stories of one scam or rip off after another including ones he was cooking up with the local authorities. After an engaging conversation he rented me a vehicle.

At the opposite end of the spectrum was my host at the Oro Guest House. A well-travelled Canadian, he was a very decent man and ran a clean house with good local food. However, he seemed completely out of place in Popondetta with its seemingly lawless atmosphere. While the guest house was pleasant, I didn't really feel secure there and slept with my one bag containing all my documents and possessions as a pillow in the event an intruder entered my room while I was sleeping. Also staying at the Oro Guest House were two Canadian anthropologists in Papua New Guinea to study the role of women in a developing society, focusing on one particular tribe living in the mountains. They were also very friendly and along with my host were the source of many very useful local travel tips. One evening at the Oro Guest House, over "Cuba Libre" drinks generously offered by our host, we swapped stories of exotic travel. We all agreed the best story was the one told by our host about a ride he took on a boat smuggling cows from Brazil into Cayenne, French Guiana.

The next two days I visited the derelict and nearly forgotten World War II combat sites at Kokoda and Buna. It struck me as very sad that these combat sites where many fell now seemed only footnotes to the history of the war in the Pacific. While later battles such as Iwo Jima

and Okinawa are much better known, it was in New Guinea, Guadalcanal, the Coral Sea and other lesser known places that the Allies halted the Japanese advance and turned the tide in the Pacific campaign.

Both Kokoda and Buna were reached by a grinding journey on some very rough roads. At least the road to Kokoda was paved up to and slightly beyond the entrance to a huge palm oil factory and plantation on the outskirts of Popondetta. Kokoda was a few hours drive south of Popondetta and marked the beginning of the Kokoda Trail which ran through dense bush to Port Moresby. Apparently the trail was popular with hikers though the locals told me you won't find any humans in the bush, just animals, criminals and spirits. Kokoda was less remote than Buna and though the road to it was rough it was clearly much more travelled, running through beautiful tropical rainforest where one of my fellow riders said all you had to do for food was to go into the bush. I was joined on the trip to Kokoda by a group of locals introduced to me by the Australian who rented me the vehicle. They wanted to take a Sunday ride out of town and served as my guides. The journey must have been something of a novelty to them as, amazingly, they were willing to take a 5-6 hour ride over rough, bumpy roads and didn't even leave the truck upon reaching Kokoda. While I really only spoke with the two sitting up front with me, they were a friendly group and bought me a coconut for refreshment along the way. Unfortunately, there wasn't much to see in Kokoda, only a few monuments to the dead of the two opposing sides and a small museum containing some rusting military relics. I wasn't able to enter the museum as the park ranger told me he had lost the key the previous week but as its walls were made of wire at least I was able to peer inside.

Buna was much more remote and felt far off the beaten track. At the time of my visit it was just a peaceful cluster of simple huts built upon stilts with a seemingly primitive population. The road to Buna reflected its isolation. It was a dirt road with very deep ruts. Tall elephant grass hung over both sides of the track as a further indication of its disuse. Travel was slow and a number of times my driver and I almost got stuck in the ruts. If we had there would not have been anyone around to help us. As we crashed through the ruts and emerged into Buna village naked children rushed to greet our vehicle. For a few kina my driver arranged for a tout to give us a tour of the local sights which included a couple of old bullets and some overgrown grassy mounds said to have been part of a Japanese defensive triangle. There also was an over-

grown Japanese cemetery, some rusting Japanese landing craft still on the beach and behind a hut in Buna village were hulks of American planes. The sheet metal from the bunkers had long ago been stripped away by the locals to create fences to keep in their pigs. Nearby was an abandoned airstrip overgrown with weeds.



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Rusting Japanese landing craft at Buna Beach.



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Hulks of World War II planes at Buna.



Abandoned airstrip at Buna in 1990.

While Kokoda and Buna were interesting and Popondetta provided a completely different perspective on Papua New Guinea when compared to Rabaul, this was a side trip. And while there was much more to ex-

plore in this part of the country, the main purpose of my trip to Papua New Guinea was to meet Seeto Kim How. Now that I knew where he was, I was eager to meet him. So after just a few days in Popondetta and having been to Buna Bay I felt it was time to move on. Before leaving I bought some wood carvings of Sepik spirits as souvenirs of my visit and then caught an Air Niugini flight back to Port Moresby connecting from there on to Sydney via Brisbane.

The prospect of meeting Seeto Kim How was exciting. Before departing on my trip I knew little about the "Chinese cook" who had become a link to David Hunter. I had learned more about him from the Chinese businessman in Rabaul and years later was to read more about him and his time with David Hunter in official records provided by the Department of the Army. While the various strands of information contain a number of inconsistencies, they nevertheless compose a fairly consistent picture of Seeto Kim How and his time in Rabaul during the Japanese occupation.

In a transcript of an interview conducted in 1947 by U.S. military personnel, Seeto Kim How said that he was born in China and came to Rabaul in 1937. This is supported by what is written in a 1946 letter to my grandfather written by the United States Marines officer who met Seeto Kim How and to whom Seeto Kim How had given David Hunter's class ring.

According to the Marine officer, Kim How said he was from Nanking and that when the Japanese swept into the city he had seen his family slaughtered and he himself had been seized as slave labor. The Japanese made him a cook and took him with them to Malaysia and then eventually on to Rabaul where his job was to cook for some of the Japanese non-commissioned officers. Later, when prisoners were brought to Rabaul, his duties also included preparing food for them. He said that he tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible in order to avoid the ire of the Japanese and while occasionally he had been mistreated most of the time he was ignored.

The Marine further wrote that all Japanese prisoners of war taken in the New Guinea-New Britain area were brought to Rabaul as it was the Japanese Army headquarters for that whole territory. Here most were held in a prisoner of war camp though some were sent on to Japan for further questioning. This usually happened to high ranking officers or to those whom the Japanese suspected of having special information.

Escape was impossible, the Marine wrote, as the surrounding islands were quite distant and in any event also were held by the Japanese.

The terrain of Rabaul itself was rugged with mountains and jungle and at that time the Japanese held all of it though in the far western part of the island there were primitive natives said to be cannibals. Even Japanese parties were said to have lost some of their members to these tribes. There were no roads and nowhere to go even if you got through the jungle. All of the Allied bases were hundreds of miles away across the water.

Japanese morale at that time was high as they thought they would win the war. However, Allied raids on Rabaul were beginning to have an effect. As the Japanese were unable to shoot down many Allied flyers, to boost the morale of their troops Japanese officers were reported to order several prisoners in the camp to be shot after each large raid and would announce to their troops that the men being executed were Allied fliers who had been shot down during the raid. More likely, the Marine wrote, the men killed were either flyers shot down in another area, such as Buna, or Australian infantrymen who had been captured on New Guinea.

In their meeting Seeto Kim How told the Marine officer that his responsibilities included preparing and taking food to these prisoners. Because escape was considered impossible and Kim How was docile, he was not closely watched. Kim How told the Marine that sometime in early August 1942 an American flyer was brought to the Rabaul prison camp. The flyer's skin had a peculiar yellowish color that accompanies malaria and it was this that caught Kim How's attention. Later that night Kim How managed to get some quinine out of the Japanese hospital and was able to bring it to the prison camp where he gave it to the flyer.

In the days that followed Kim How told the Marine that he managed to secure a little more quinine or atabrine each day and took it to the prisoner of war camp each night. While there was little conversation between the two, as Kim How said he spoke little English and the flyer spoke no Chinese, the Marine believed a bond developed between the two men as Kim How seemed visibly affected as he recounted this story even though it was three years later.

Kim How recalled that around mid-August, 1942, an Allied raid did considerable damage to Rabaul and there were grumblings among the Japanese troops that the anti-aircraft defense had been poor. The Japanese high command then announced that several flyers had been shot down and would be executed in the morning. That night, as he was serving food to the Japanese non-commissioned officers, Kim How heard them discussing the coming executions and realized that the flyer

with malaria was to be one of the men selected. That night when at the prison camp Kim How told the Marine that he conveyed to the flyer by word and sign language that he was to be shot in the morning. It was at this time that the flyer took off his ring and gave it to Kim How in a gesture of thanks for the quinine, friendliness and the warning. Kim How said that this was the last time he saw the flyer. The next morning Kim How reported that five prisoners were taken out of the camp and shot.

In general, the story as related by the Marine officer is consistent with what Kim How was to tell me when I met him in Sydney. It is also generally consistent with records held in the official Department of the Army files.

One of the Department of the Army records is a statement Seeto Kim How provided in 1946. In this he records that in July 1942, while he was working as a cook for a Japanese Military Police Detachment in Rabaul, an American prisoner of war was brought to the prison camp there. The Japanese had an M.P. guard the prisoner at all times and no one was allowed to speak with him though as the cook Kim How said he used to bring the prisoner his meals three times a day. Around that time additional Japanese troops along with cargo were coming ashore and all the M.P.'s except one were sent to the wharves to keep an eye on the cargo being discharged. The M.P. who remained in the office was responsible for a variety of tasks and therefore was not always able to accompany Kim How when he went to the jail to deliver the POW his meals. When necessary, the M.P. gave Kim How the key to the jail and allowed him to go alone.

Kim How reported that the POW was suffering from malaria and one of his arms was injured. Kim How said he would bring the POW medicine as well as eggs and bread, hidden in his pocket so as not to be detected by the Japanese, in order to supplement the meager regular meals. One day when they were alone, and although Kim How spoke little English at that time, the POW thanked him for the food and medicine and gave him the ring. Shortly thereafter the POW was taken away by the Japanese. When the Japanese soldiers returned they went to the kitchen and each took a handful of salt and scattered it over the kitchen floor, convincing Kim How that the POW had been executed because this was the Japanese custom whenever a man was executed or passed away, regardless of his nationality.

After the termination of hostilities, according to Kim How's statement, American officers came to the Chinese compound to inquire about Japanese ill treatment of Allied prisoners of war. As he was familiar with the fate of this one particular POW, Kim How said that he reported it

in detail to the Americans and gave one of them the ring.

While this recounting is generally consistent with what Kim How told the Marine officer, there are inconsistencies. There are other inconsistencies between the various accounts of Seeto Kim How's story. For example, according to the transcript of the 1947 interview, Kim How denied that he told the Marine he saw his family slaughtered by the Japanese in Nanking. He also said that because he didn't understand Japanese he did not overhear the Japanese discussing that POW's were to be executed and therefore did not know of Lieutenant Hunter's fate beforehand. Nevertheless, the principal features of Seeto Kim How's story as related in the various accounts are largely consistent. This confirms that Seeto Kim How did serve as a cook for the Japanese in Rabaul, that he had contact with Allied prisoners of war and that he was the person who gave the Marine officer David Hunter's class ring. While only speculation, the discrepancies between Seeto Kim How's different accounts may be because he provided the accounts at different times and emphasized different circumstances each time, possibly because he was more circumspect in later interviews or simply due to translation discrepancies since all of the accounts were conducted through an intermediary.

Upon arriving in Sydney I checked into a hotel and called Seeto Kim How. He graciously agreed to meet me at my hotel for coffee, arriving with his son-in-law. Both were very pleasant, apparently successful businessmen. Seeto Kim How seemed to be a very kind and thoughtful man and appeared to be in good health and in his seventies. They told me they had left Rabaul long ago for the relative stability of Australia when offered the opportunity of Australian citizenship at the time Papua New Guinea gained independence.

Kim How clearly remembered David Hunter, even his name which Kim How learned during the post-war investigations into the whereabouts of the missing flyer. In particular Kim How remembered the school ring, confirming that David Hunter had given it to him and that he had passed it to an American officer after the war.

As Kim How recalled the events almost 50 years after they occurred, David Hunter was brought to Rabaul and kept in a small room upstairs in a house which served as Kempeitai headquarters. At this stage of the war Kim How said that an American pilot was a rare POW since of the few that were shot down most died in combat. David Hunter arrived appearing malarial and with an injured arm and was kept by the Japa-

nese for interrogation. Kim How said that he himself was a cook for the Japanese soldiers, a good job he said, and would bring David Hunter his paltry meal of rice with maybe a black bean or fish sauce. Kim How recalled that at times he would smuggle into the jail a peeled banana or a cooked egg being careful not to leave any remains which would get him into trouble with the Japanese. Kim How said that he also brought David Hunter some quinine which he was able to obtain from the Chinese who had been impressed into labor at the Japanese infirmary. Kim How said he was in a position to do this because he could barter the medicine for food stolen from the Japanese kitchen where he worked. From what Kim How could ascertain, David Hunter was not beaten or badly treated by his captors. While confirming that David Hunter gave him the ring, Kim How did not go into the circumstances under which this occurred. Kim How said that since the two men did not share a common language they were not able communicate much and that after a month or so David Hunter was taken away. The next day the Japanese sprinkled the room with salt in a cleansing ritual. Seeto Kim How never saw David Hunter again.

While my meeting with Seeto Kim How was very cordial, it was also fairly brief and as I recall he did not go into great detail regarding David Hunter and his time as a Japanese prisoner of war. At that time I had not read the Department of the Army file regarding the post war investigation into the disappearance of Lieutenant Hunter. Had I done so, most likely I would have been able to ask Seeto Kim How many more detailed questions. Regardless, Kim How did confirm the major aspects of the David Hunter story as they had been passed down by my family. What he told me was also consistent with what I would read in the Department of the Army files some 23 years later. In any event, looking back, I think it is unlikely I would have returned to Rabaul at that time to follow up on anything I may have learned from Seeto Kim How upon more detailed questioning.

I got the impression that Seeto Kim How was reluctant to go into too much detail regarding David Hunter's time in captivity. This may have been due to sensitivity to my family or perhaps he simply didn't remember the details of events that had transpired nearly 50 years earlier. I also got the feeling that this meeting gave Seeto Kim How a sense of closure to what must have been a terrible period in his life. The fact that I had traveled half way around the world to meet him must have made it clear to him that meeting him would provide a sense of closure

to my family as well. In any event, at the conclusion of a very friendly meeting we exchanged addresses and promised to remain in contact.

The following year I received a Christmas card from one of Seeto Kim How's sons with the sad news that Seeto Kim How had unexpectedly died in September of that year. Enclosed was a picture of Kim How sitting in the center of his extended family. The son wrote that at Seeto Kim How's funeral the story of my visit the previous year was related to those at the church. My relative, David Hunter, the son also wrote, experienced the kindness that was characteristic of his father who always placed the well-being of others before his own.



MATTHEW KENNEDY

Seeto Kim How and his family in Australia.

Twenty-three years after meeting Seeto Kim How and 71 years after David Hunter was shot down over Buna Bay, I found myself with the time to return to this story. I had long intended to document the story of David Hunter and my related trip to Papua New Guinea and now had the time to do it. In doing so, I have drawn on diary entries I wrote during my trip, family records and de-classified files regarding Lieutenant Hunter made available by the United States Department of the Army. And while my meeting with Seeto Kim How brought one chapter of the David Hunter story to a close, the story itself goes on. According to the Department of the Army, while the identification of the class

ring and the determination that it belonged to Lieutenant Hunter instigated one of the most extensive searches ever conducted for remains, none recovered have been positively identified as belonging to Lieutenant Hunter. However the search continues and the Department of the Army reports that even today there are 18 teams in the field conducting searches in various locations around the world for the remains of World War II servicemen. In some ways, with modern DNA testing, chances have improved that Lieutenant Hunter's remains, if recovered, may be positively identified and given the proper burial that he deserves. In the meantime, David Hunter is memorialized both in the cemetery of his home town in Proctor, Vermont and on the Wall of Missing at the American Cemetery and Memorial in Manila in the Philippines.



(Top left photo) David Hunter, First Lieutenant, U.S. Army Air Corps, in Australia in 1942. David was listed as missing in action in July 1942 over Buna New Guinea. (Top right photo) David's Proctor High School class ring from class of 1937 which bore his initials "D. S. H." He was the only person in that class with those initials. This ring was later to become an important clue in what happened to David. (Bottom photo) Memorial stone for Lt. David S. Hunter in the Proctor Vt. Cemetery. David's body was never recovered.

